

Conflict in the Local Church:

Ron Benefiel, Ph.D.

"Watch out for the preacher-trap on your right!" "Enemy aircraft coming in at 2:00!" "Ouch! You just sunk my Sunday School Sub!" "Be sure to take up the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the...church board!"

Ah yes, the familiar images of the church at work. As much as we preach peace, and call for unity and even deny our disharmony, there it is —conflict within the Church of Jesus Christ, rough edges and ruffled feathers among the sanctified. Forget River City, we've got all the trouble we can handle right here in Kansas City.

How dare we still call ourselves the church. Can this possibly be even a faint resemblance of what Christ intends for us? But wait a minute, to be fair, if we eliminate ourselves from the true fold, there would be some others who would have to go as well. Others in the church through the years who have run into their share of conflict—John Wesley, Martin Luther, St. Francis Augustine, and of course, Peter and Paul. Maybe there's hope for us.

It seems to me there are plenty of sources of conflict in the modern local church. First of all there is all the normal stuff, what you might expect from any social organization. The church is apparently not exempt from the competition for scarce resources and the corresponding power dynamics associated with organizational decision making. Competition for position, finances, and space are no stranger to us (enter turf protection, sacred cows, and budget wars.) Somebody is going to direct the choir...and somebody else isn't. If you spend the money on a new air conditioner, the same dollars just aren't going to be there to hire a new youth director. If somebody doesn't control the use of the kitchen, there won't be necessary utensils on hand for when you really need them.

In addition to the "normal" expected sources of conflict, the church is probably subject to a few extra sources as well. Conflict which is spawned by the very nature of the church itself.

An obvious example of this inherent conflict surfaces in the form of differing ideologies regarding the nature and purpose of the church. Does the church primarily exist to serve those who are within or to reach out to those who are not yet in? Is the church primarily the conservator of traditional cultural and moral values or is it primarily counter-culture, challenging the status quo, questioning the infiltration of materialism and nationalism into the church, and pursuing a social justice "agenda"? Of course, we would like to think that that we can be committed to both sides of the question...both evangelism and discipleship, committed to producing good citizens who also have a sensitivity to the systemic injustice in our world.

But it seems there is a built-in tension between the ends of these continua, that we inevitably come down factoring one side or the other. And, that the different philosophies favored by different persons in the same local church body create tension and conflict when it comes to the implementation of church programs. Should we make an effort to be respected in the community? Should we encourage our people and pastor to join Rotary and the Chamber of Commerce? Should we prioritize having a building that is clean, well-maintained and an architectural credit to the community? Should we join a protest march on City Hall on behalf of the poor? Should we make our facility available to assist those in need in the community? (It

may be difficult to keep a building in top-notch shape if the facility is used throughout the week to assist scores of poor and homeless in the need of food, shelter, and work.) Should the church be trying to help the poor or does that merely foster a dependency? Are people really in need of assistance or do they simply need to get out there and work for a living like everybody else? Is the church the last bulwark of societal values or is it to be leading the way as a change-agent? Different people have differing perspectives on the purpose and mission of the church...and there is conflict.

This whole discussion is really part of the larger issue of pluralism within the church. A central value of the church is that "everybody is welcome." Jesus died for everybody and this is His church...so everyone is welcome. Posted on church signs and printed on the inside flaps of church bulletins—"everyone is welcome." But if they all come, all those different people, **look out!** I can see then *now*, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the hippie and the yuppie, the Republican and the Democrat, the Socialist and the Libertarian, the fundamentalist and the neo-pentecostal, the black and the white, the educated and the illiterate, the immigrant and the president of the local DAR all sitting side by side in the church—and there is conflict. Maybe Dr. Wagner is right, maybe we should just "go with the flow, keep it simple, don't buck the sociological realities." But still we remember we are the church and everyone really is welcome.

In the pluralistic neighborhood of Los Angeles, the church I pastor has a lot of interesting people (interesting seems like a wise word to use here). People from every imaginable background and calling. And there are enough people from several of the backgrounds and callings to form sub-groups within the church, a Spanish-speaking congregation, a community youth program, an elementary school, a Filipino congregation, a jobs program and so on. It doesn't require a great deal of imagination to understand that the various groups each have vested interests, cultural/sub-cultural perspectives, and unique facility needs...and there is conflict, or shall we call it war? At different times the battles take on different strategies including sabotage, intimidation, espionage, subterfuge, public relations campaigns, and verbal combat. The word from different quarters is that...

- The folks in the food pantry have just installed **another** refrigerator that was not approved by the committee
 - The Spanish Bible College is griping about the trash not getting picked up, **again**.
 - The youth drop-in center got a major grant and they are planning to take over the **whole** third floor, in fact they already turned a classroom into a **weigh-lifting** room...look out below!
 - The Filipinos are behind on their monthly building use assessment
 - The homeless served by compassionate ministries are sleeping on the church grounds in increasing numbers and have busted all the outside light because it keeps them awake at night. (Maybe if we quit feeding them they'd move on to another neighborhood.)
 - The Spanish-speaking congregation has just hung flags from seven Central American countries in the **sanctuary**.
- and—the Koreans, just let me tell you about the Koreans...

They pray too late
They don't supervise their children.
They are oblivious to security issues.

They pray too loud.

They may actually be speaking in tongues when they pray (can't tell for sure) and every Sunday when they cook their noon meal, the whole church smells like Kim Chi!

Well friends, there it is—the church in all her glory, full of competing interests, problems, and **conflict**. Shall we go on?

There is a third tension problem inherent within the church that I want to mention. It has to do with the church as a volunteer organization. As an organization of volunteers, the church is always in desperate need of committed, capable leaders. It especially needs a few folks who can "help make things happen." People who are efficient, responsible, work-oriented, focused, and highly motivated. Some of these folks also cause waves...big ones. Do you know what I'm talking about? Conflict!

As a volunteer organization, the church necessarily depends largely on the commitment of its volunteers to accomplish its goals. There are, of course, varying degrees of commitment—ah, and there's the rub! If 10-20% of the people end up getting stuck with 80-90% of the responsibility, it won't take long before the 10-20% begin feeling overworked, burned out, and resentful toward all the free-loaders who are sitting around doing next to nothing.

The givers and takers motif is especially interesting when applied to services offered to the community. Not only do the givers begin to get angry at the takers, the so-called "takers" may get angry at the givers for not giving it the way they want it. Frequently someone is angry at those distributing food pantry for not providing the kind of food they had in mind. Several times now fist fights have broken out in the food line. Now that's what I call conflict!

Have I said enough? Allow me to review. Not only does the church carry the normal power and turf conflicts centered around position, finance, and space use, it also gives birth to its own sources of conflict: ideological tensions, a commitment to heterogeneity and the problems associated with being a volunteer organization. (All of this and we haven't even said anything about theological differences.)

What can we do? Wait it out? Hope it all goes away? They say time has a way of healing old wounds. The problem is, it looks to me like we will inevitably continue to inflict new ones.

I am afraid there is no way out. Conflict in the church is destined to be a way of life.

With so much conflict, it makes you wonder how the church holds together at all. With so many different ideas and vested interests, why doesn't the whole thing just fall apart? I have come to the rather profound sociological conclusion, and I mean this sincerely, it is a miracle of God.